

[Review] Selina Todd (2005) Young women, work and family in England, 1918-1950

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Young women, work and family in England, 1918–1950. By Selina Todd. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2005. Pp. xiii+272. ISBN 0-19-928275-7. £50.00.

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there have been tensions but believes, on the basis of experience thus far, that they are capable of amicable resolution. These assessments are complemented by papers on Scottish migrants in England and English migrants in Scotland. It is rare to have such a basis for comparison. Neil MacCormack, David McCrone, and others, in the final section, speculate on what may happen as the twenty-first century unfolds, while John Tomaney contributes a 'borderland' perspective by looking at the north-east of England as a region, an unwilling one, it would now seem. Philip Schlesinger, reflecting on the media, highlights the 'communications' issues in post-devolution Scotland. It should be apparent that this second volume has emerged from the Edinburgh conference and it is the Scottish element in the Anglo-Scottish relationship that is weighted, even to the extent of meticulously eschewing the alphabet and writing chapters on 'Scotland and England'. Almost all the contributors are Scots or have academic posts in Scotland.

Sufficient of the flavour of this volume has been given to confirm its difference from the first. Both volumes make a valuable contribution to the consideration of a relationship that is certain to be discussed in 2007, and in whatever lies 'beyond'. We should be grateful for what they provide, even if, as has been explained, they do not constitute the seamless historical analysis, at all its levels of complexity, which should ideally inform that consideration.

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Young women, work and family in England, 1918–1950. By Selina Todd. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2005. Pp. xiii + 272. ISBN 0-19-928275-7. £50.00.

In *Young women, work and family in England*, Selina Todd offers a systematic and nuanced analysis of the relationship between young women, employment, social life, and family across the period 1918–50. Asserting at the outset that within these years 'young women workers served as motifs of social, economic, and cultural continuity and change' (p. 1), Todd argues for the centrality of young women to our understanding of English society in the first half of the twentieth century. In this, the book builds on existing work by Jerry White and Sally Alexander and more recent interventions on European girlhood by, amongst others, Penny Tinkler, Birgitte Søland, and Christina Benninghaus. Todd's primary contention is that young women's employment practices profoundly structured their lives and impacted in complex and significant ways upon the lives of their families and wider communities. Accordingly, she successfully challenges an assumption, implicit in the research foci of many historians, that workplaces were marginal to cultural constructions of femininity in this period. The book therefore fills an important gap in the existing literature on women in the first half of the twentieth century and will be greatly welcomed by researchers and students alike.

Young women, work and family in England is an example of historical research at its meticulous best. The book is built upon census evidence, contemporary social surveys, government records, and those of trade unions and employers. Additionally it draws on eighty-one oral history interviews gathered from existing oral history collections and a range of published autobiographies. This book therefore bridges the qualitative–quantitative divide to

impressive effect, offering a master class in how to write social *and* economic history. Its contribution to periodization is similarly significant: in addressing the years between 1918 and 1950 the book demonstrates both the profound impact of the First World War upon employment opportunities and aspirations and the paradoxical status of youth in the aftermath of the Second World War. In extending its remit beyond the customary cut-off point of 1939 or 1945, it is able to make suggestive comments concerning the development of youth culture into the later twentieth century.

The book consists of seven substantive chapters: the first three explore the ways young women's working lives were shaped by employers, state, and family, the remaining four place agency and aspiration centre stage. Chapters one to three therefore establish the centrality of paid work to young women's lives, mapping change and continuity in employment opportunities and offering a convincing explanation of young women's position within the labour force. These chapters suggest that the demands of the family economy exerted a tenacious grip upon young women's lives and that the centrality of girls' wages to working-class households had a profound impact upon intra- and extra-family relationships. The interplay between social background, family networks, and occupational choice is also carefully delineated. Chapter four offers important new interventions in relation to occupational, geographical, and social mobility suggesting that the 'relationship between occupation and social status was more nuanced and less straightforward for young women than for men' (p. 143). Chapters five and six examine workplace culture and young women's activism. In each, the significance of paid labour to the shaping of individual and collective identities is highlighted. The final chapter focuses upon leisure and courtship, demonstrating how attention to paid employment aids our understanding of leisure consumption and the youthful quest for social and financial independence. The complexity of young women's relationship with work, family, and social life is affirmed throughout.

This book makes a significant and timely contribution to its field. Its assertion that 'the world of work was central to the lives of all working class people in mid-twentieth-century England, not simply those of adult men' (p. 225) is soundly made and very well supported. Throughout, substantial new information concerning the work experiences of young women is presented. In this way, Todd takes the historiography of youth well beyond the realm of leisure and consumption upon which it has, hitherto, focused. This can only lead to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the lives and agency of young women in this period. However, this book makes a contribution beyond its immediate field. For example, Todd's evidence aids our growing awareness of cultural constructions of femininity as multi-faceted. Todd also contributes more broadly to our understanding of the ways in which class, gender, age, generation, and location interact in the formation of social identities and the structuring of material circumstance. In its interrogation of key categories of historical analysis this book therefore offers more nuanced ways of working with these categories within any historical period. Additionally Todd demonstrates that there is much to be gained from methodologies which see the qualitative and the quantitative as complementary and mutually illuminating. In summary then, this is a sophisticated book by a fine historian.